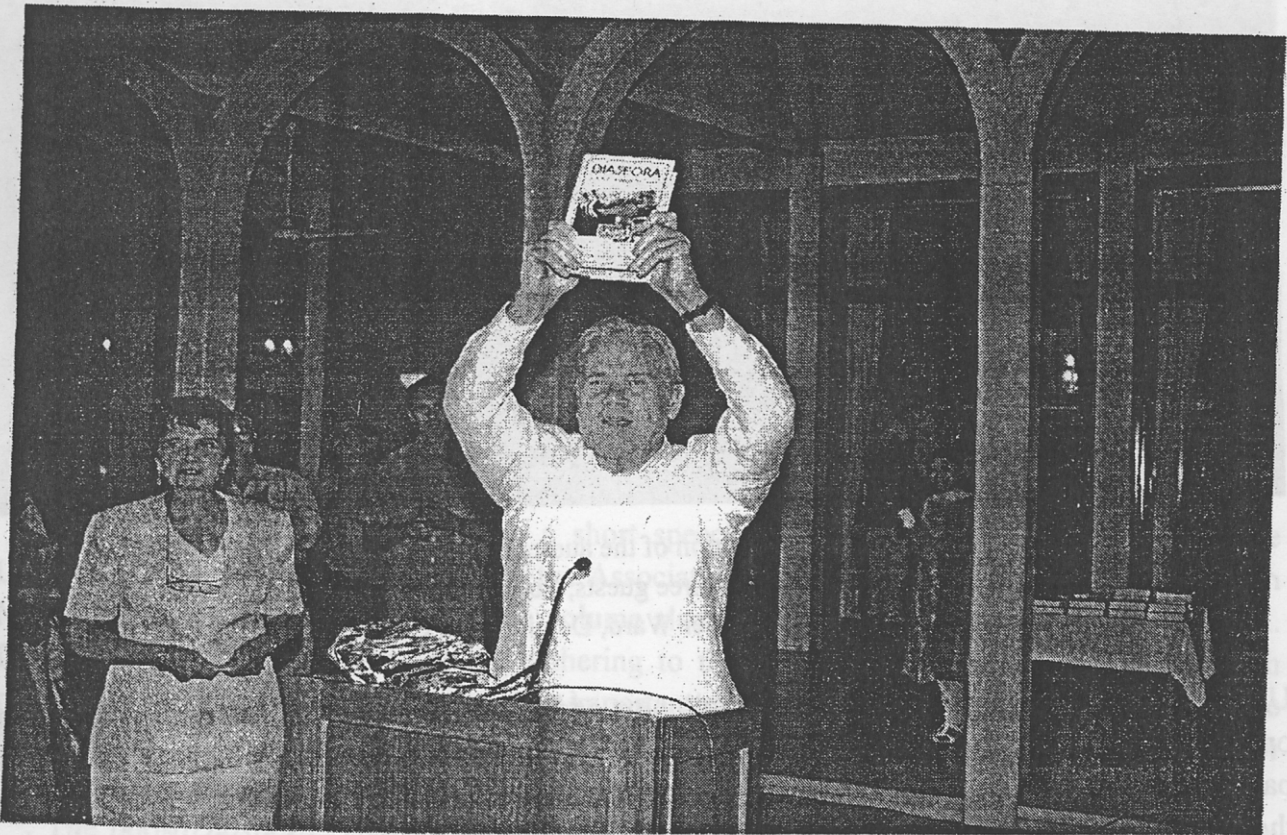


ASAA NEWSLETTER

ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF AUSTRALASIA IN ASIA

Diaspora: The Australasian Experience The Book Launch



H E Mr. John Mc Carthy, Australian High Commissioner, India launches the book

Diaspora: The Australasian Experience, the book of the papers of the third ASAA (Association of Study of Australasia in Asia) Conference held at University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, in July 2004, co-ed. Cynthia vanden Driesen & Ralph Crane, was launched at a function organized by Australian High Commission, New Delhi, on 23 October 2005. About eighty Australianists from different universities and walks of life participated. Also present was the Deputy High Commissioner of New Zealand Ms. Heather Ward. The event was presided over by H E Mr. John McCarthy who opened the relaxed and informal evening with some prefatory comments on his own experiences and ideas on the theme of diaspora. Dr. Cynthia vanden Driesen of Edith Cowan



A section of the audience

Front row: LTR. Keya Majumdar, three guests, Serge Liberman and R.K. Dhawan
 Second row, second from left: Ms. Heather Ward, Deputy High Commissioner, New Zealand

University, one of the co-editors of the book, next addressed the audience. Rather than dwelling on the tremendous effort that had obviously gone into the preparation of the huge book of 544 pages, she chose to speak about the history of ASAA and its formation in Colombo, Sri Lanka, on the occasion of the ACLALS Conference in 1994, by a group of Asian and Australian academics to promote awareness of aspects of Australian literature and culture in Asia. Since then, three conferences of the Association have been held: the first in 1996 in Thiruvananthapuram; the second in 2000 at the University of Mysore; and the third in 2004 again in Thiruvananthapuram. Soon after the first conference, the Association was expanded to include New Zealand and the name of the Association was changed appropriately. The papers presented at each of the conferences have been published as substantial volumes which have added to the resources for Australasian Studies. The success of the Association's work is attested by the fact that an Indian Association for the study of Australian studies was formed subsequently and the interest in the region continues to grow.



Jyotsna Thakur, Keya Majumdar, K.T. Sunitha, Cynthia vanden Driesen,
HE John McCarthy, R.K. Dhawan, Serge Liberman, Asha Das and Suman Bala

Her presentation was followed by a short speech by Professor K.T. Sunitha of Mysore University, the Asian Vice-President of the Association. Serge Liberman, a creative writer from Melbourne and also a contributor to the volume also spoke on the theme of Diaspora. Dr. R.K. Dhawan brought the attention of the gathering to the *Journal of Australasian Studies* which represents an independent initiative and an important expansion of Indian interest in this field. He thanked the hosts as well as those contributors like Dr. Keya Majumdar and Dr. Sunitha for travelling all the way to New Delhi for the event.

The book *Diaspora: The Australasian Experience* was then formally released by Mr. John McCarthy, the Australian High Commissioner. Refreshments were served and the guests mingled informally in the delightful ambience of the gardens of the High Commission.

The evening was a tribute to the organizing talents of Ms. Asha Das of the Australian High Commission and her colleagues especially Ms. Jyotsna Thakur. ASAA's appreciative thanks are due to the AIC for travel assistance to Dr. Sunitha and also—most important—for the assistance with the publication of the book and the conference before it. The Book Launch was a fitting finale to several months of collaborative work. The function concluded with a vote of thanks proposed by Dr. Dhawan.

XII International Commonwealth Conference

13-15 October 2005

The 12th International Conference of the Indian Society for Commonwealth Studies was held at the Department of Humanities, I.I.T., Roorkee, on 13-15 October 2005. More than two hundred scholars from across the country and fourteen scholars from abroad participated in the Conference and deliberated on themes like Literature of Migration, Women's Studies, Subaltern Writing and Asian Writing in English. Dr. R.K. Dhawan (President), Dr. Suman Bala (Organizing Secretary), Dr. D.K. Pabby (General Secretary) and Professor Pashupati Jha (Convener) were the chief organizers. An issue of *The Commonwealth Review*, a bi-annual journal devoted to new literatures, was released by Ms. Heather Ward, Deputy High Commissioner of New Zealand in India. Three scholars from Australia—Professor David Myers (Queensland), Professor Sudesh Mishra (Deakin) and Dr. Serge Liberman (Melbourne)—attended the Conference. We give below the responses of Professor David Myers and Dr. Serge Liberman to this important literary event.

Impressions of the International Conference on Commonwealth Studies

David Myers, University of Queensland

I was most impressed by the extraordinary enthusiasm and commitment shown by some 250 delegates from universities all over the subcontinent, some of whom had travelled for two days and two nights to participate. I have never seen such commitment and such devotion to the cause of contemporary literature in academic conferences in the west.

The organisers, led by the President of Indian Society for Commonwealth Studies Dr. R.K. Dhawan, and the hosts at Roorkee University showed considerable flexibility when numbers increased unexpectedly from 170 to 250. Extra sessions were arranged and all delegates had a chance to deliver their papers. Papers favoured such themes as the Indian diaspora, subaltern writing, neo-feminism, postcolonialism and literary representations of the plight of the dalits. The enthusiasm for the contemporary Indian novel was very high indeed and rightly so, given that Indian literature today is treading the world stage with great success.

There were some excellent dramatic exchanges on such topics as: What is Indianness? And what should have priority in the literary curriculum of Indian universities today: the conservative English literary tradition or the contemporary Indian novel?

The hosting of daily meals by the staff of Roorkee University was truly outstanding and the vegetarian curries were delicious. The friendliness of delegates at these meal breaks and the spontaneous conversations were for me the highlights of the conference. The evening dinner hosted by the Vice-Chancellor of Roorkee University in the marquee had a wonderful atmosphere. The venue at Roorkee University was a haven of serenity sheltered from the hubbub of the outside world.

The conference excursion to Haridwar and the banks of the holy Ganges was spectacular and very memorable. Indeed, it inspired me to write a few short stories.

A Feast of Literature at a Three-Week Indian Banquet

Serge Liberman

ROORKEE. If asked to name the three profoundest impressions that I brought home with me from my recent second-time appearance at a literary conference in India [my first being at the Association for the Study of Australasia in Asia (ASAA) Conference in Thiruvananthapuram in July 2004, and this being the International Conference on Commonwealth Literature, held at the Department of Humanities and Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, at Roorkee, on October 13-15, 2005], I would answer, the sheer enthusiasm for literature of the participants and the living issues raised by the authors they dealt with; the easy camaraderie, harmony and hospitality of everyone present, that certainly made this antipodean visitor find a happy, integral unselfconscious place in their midst; and the unstinting attention I gained from the organisers at every level to any requests I had.

Conferences being the opportunities for exchange of learning that they are, they would have little value if they were void of substance. To myself, a non-academic general medical practitioner invited to contribute to this Conference as an author on any of its stated themes—Migration and Diaspora; Women’s Writing; Subaltern Writing. Both the range and depth of subject matter overwhelmed. Some 250 participants presented 200 papers ranging from the works, among many others, of Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Ben Okri, Rohinton Mistry, Shashi Deshpande, Patrick White and Chinua Achebe to Parsi, Dalit and Canadian women’s literature, psycho-philosophical aspects of feminism, Indian linguistic mysticism, and women in cyber culture, with both new and novel slants and perspectives given on many of these. A glance through the 120-plus page handbook to the Conference would do more justice than any number of my words to the matter presented. I believe that a volume of selected papers may in due course appear.

The weightiness of the proceedings was leavened by a brief excursion to the festival burning of the gigantic effigies of the demon-king Ravana, confirming the victory of good over evil, then a half-day’s journey to the nearby sacred city of Haridwar with its plethora of shops and pavement displays selling food, assorted goods and religious artefacts and the sundown converging crush of people, and the flocks of pilgrims propelling floating flaming offerings along the holy Ganges. Complementing this was a separate visit to Rishikesh with its “swinging” Lakshman Jhula suspension bridge, thoroughfare to bicycles, motorcycles, cows, dogs, goats, monkeys and people of course, a town of narrow market lanes, of yoga, temples, ashrams and retreats, and a bend in the river with its ferries which no photographer can resist from capturing along with the higher mountains rising on the other side.

NEW DELHI: With Roorkee over, my own literary adventures were not yet over. On returning to Delhi for a further week before moving on to Kolkata and Kharagpur, I found myself addressing and reading from my work to a class of students and staff at the University of Delhi; I had the distinct pleasure of attending a marvellously elegant, colourful and vivacious launch of Vikram Seth’s new book, *Two Lives*, and two evenings later, finding myself in a packed-out venue at a forum chaired (and dominated because of all audience questions being directed at him)

by the literary polymath, "The Name of the Rose" Umberto Eco himself. Add to this a visit to the Jewish synagogue in Delhi on the Sabbath Eve, to which I was taken by a charming, multi-talented polyglot graduate student who had attended my university address, and at which I was invited to take an active part in the service, and my cup was near to flowing over.

I had to sip off some of its contents, for, three days later, on the 24th October, came ASAA's big moment of 2005—the launch of the papers presented at its 2004 Thiruvananthapuram Conference assembled into one very impressive—and dare I say it without seeming to be overly partisan?—important and seminal volume titled *Diaspora: The Australasian Experience* (Prestige Publications, New Delhi, 544 pp.) edited by Cynthia vanden Driesen and Ralph Crane, with contributions from scholars and authors from India, Australia, Sri Lanka and New Zealand. Held at the Australian High Commissioner's residence, with the High Commissioner himself launching it, the evening proved a homely affair.

KHARAGPUR: I mentioned at the outset three of the profoundest impressions that I brought home with me from India this time around. This proved as true of Kharagpur, two hours by train outside Kolkata, to which I travelled on after Delhi, as it had been in Roorkee.

To these I wish, however, to add a fourth, and again equally true of both east and west. This was the attentiveness and responsiveness of the students to whom I had occasion to speak across my north Indian transit. Where my contact with students in Delhi was very brief, in Kharagpur, I



delivered a talk accompanied by a reading from my work, conducted a writers' workshop which lengthened from the scheduled sixty minutes to twice that time, and co-judged a short story competition, the stories having to be written within the space of two hours on topics sight unseen until the signal to begin; viz.: "Asleep on a Kolkata Station Platform", "On the Wings of an Eagle", "If Monkeys Could Talk" and "The Singing Waiter". The end-result was an overall impressive feat of inventiveness, narrative flow, characterisation and many things besides that enter into the telling of a good story. These students, it must be said, were not students of literature or of creative writing. Not at all! Many of them would be heading into management, communication, and harder scientific careers. But in this exercise there was an object lesson, something that I have long believed: namely that many youngsters possess an innate ability to write imaginatively, creatively and originally, which, if encouragingly nurtured and teased out of them can only be to their own and to a wider enrichment.

Notwithstanding the inevitable difficulties, deprivations and poverty to which none can be blind and before which, like a myriad other visitors before me, I was helpless to do anything about, I left India as I did in July 2004, after the ASAA Conference in Kerala, with an abiding fondness for the country, for its people, its literature, its academic personnel and its students.

As this is a personal recounting of my three weeks' stay in India, I wish to place on record here my most genuine thanks and gratitude to Drs. R.K. and Usha Dhawan, Professor Pashupati Jha, Dr. Suman Bala, Dr. D.K. Pabby, Dr. Rashmi Gaur, Dr. Anjali Gera Roy, Gautam Chakrabarti, each of whom will know why, along with anyone I may have inadvertently omitted. I must also acknowledge the managements of the guest houses in which I received accommodation, and all those auto-rickshaw drivers and anxious-to-help casual passers-by who gave each other support and further directions when the one in whose back seat I sat seemed to be heading for Mumbai when the place I sought was but a kilometre away!

Serge Liberman Talks of 'Dispossession, Migration and Home' at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur

Aditi Amrita Sarangi, I.I.T., Kharagpur

Dr. Serge Liberman spoke on *Dispossession, Migration and Home Personalized* at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, on 26th October 2005. Professor Suhita Chopra Chatterjee, Seminar Coordinator, introduced the speaker and Professor Anjali Gera Roy, in giving a quick overview of the issues involved, located it in the Indian context, particularly those displaced by the Indian Partition of 1947. A multidisciplinary audience, including faculty, students and staff attended the talk, which was followed by a thought-provoking interactive session. Of particular interest were other personal stories of dispossession that emerged and narratives of displacement in diverse times and places, such as those of the Palestinians and Kashmiris as well as the voluntary migrations of the I.I.T. diaspora. Later that afternoon, Dr Liberman visited the Nehru Museum of Science and Technology, the old Hijli Detention Centre where political prisoners were kept during British rule. He also attended a talk on the Partition of Bengal by an eminent Indian historian organized by the Nehru Museum.

Creative Writing Workshop at IIT, Kharagpur

Anjali Roy, IIT, Kharagpur

Recently, the students of I.I.T., Kharagpur, had the privilege of spending an evening with the noted Jewish Australian writer Dr. Serge Liberman. As students whose regular engagements are with mathematics and physics, we had the rare chance of interacting with a literary luminary. A lot of IITians love writing and we finally got to discuss the nuances of the art with someone who has been passionate about it since the tender age of 16. Also the fact that Dr. Liberman is a fully qualified medical practitioner was a huge encouragement to us as it was proof of the fact that engineering and writing need not be mutually exclusive.

Dr. Liberman addressed an enthralled audience of more than 100 students. Initially, he spoke to us about his own life, his beginning as a writer, his career as an author and his vast experience interacting with other budding authors. In the second half of the evening, he invited questions from us regarding any aspect of writing that we wished to discuss. Students who write regularly sought his guidance for improving their skills and requested him to share tips that would enable them to express their thoughts better. Dr. Liberman gave us an idea about the key ingredients that make up a good article and also talked about what he personally liked the most in the literature he read. Language, plot development, character portrayal, flow of thought, coherence, interesting beginnings and endings, he spoke in vivid detail about them all. Those who are yet to start were advised to start irrespective of the quality of the material they initially produced. Our honorable guest explained that writing skills would get honed over time and writing frequently was an exercise that would enable us to release our hidden talent. The well-known phenomenon of 'the writer's block' was discussed and Dr. Liberman assured us that pegging on without getting discouraged would help us surmount any stumbling blocks.

At the end of the evening, Dr. Serge Liberman wished us success, both in the field of engineering and in our passion for writing and we thanked him for sparing his valuable time for us and sharing such precious nuggets of knowledge.

Forthcoming Conferences

Seva-Bharati Mahavidyalaya (Vidyasagar University) Kaptari, Midnapore, W.B., will host a two-day National Seminar on **Australian Literature: Identity, Representation and Belonging**, Feb.21-22, 2006. The seminar will cover the following sub-themes: a) Nation and Literature; b) Diasporic writing; c) Aborigine studies; d) Australian film; e) Comparative studies between literature in Australia and India. The seminar aims at providing an opportunity to teachers, scholars, students and educational administrators to understand the various developments in the concerned field. Papers presented at the seminar will be published in a book form. Abstract should reach on or before Jan.15, 2006. Full papers within January 31, 2006. For details: Dr. Jaydeep Sarangi, convener of the seminar. e-mail: sarangij@rediffmail.com. Phone 09434037685.

Third International Conference of Indian Association for the Study of Australia will be held at University of Poona, Pune, on 9-11 January 2006. The theme of the conference is Australia and India: Convergences and Divergences. For details contact Professor Santosh Sareen, Chairperson, Centre for Literature and Culture Studies, J.N.U., New Delhi 110 067.